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Four Core Challenges: A Report from the Newton School Committee

Six years ago, the Newton School Committee cited as the overarching task for itself and its new Superintendent the need to build on the past excellence of the school system while articulating a new vision for the future. A formal “Challenge Letter” went on to identify five additional priorities: responding to state education reform; providing consistent academic challenge to all students; respecting human differences; improving management systems; and mobilizing public support. The effort to maximize strengths and respond to new educational realities has driven much of the Superintendent’s work and our work as a School Committee – and much of what the Newton Schools have accomplished – over the past six years. The document itself has served as the basic blueprint for the Superintendent’s leadership and our stewardship of the Newton Public Schools. For the most part, the challenges the original letter identified have been addressed or are well on the way to being addressed. It is time to consider the major new issues that now lie in front of us and to seek consensus on overarching priorities for the future of our schools.

Success, we believe, will continue to depend on extending the system’s strengths, both those of longstanding duration and those more recently developed, and on mastering new challenges and opportunities. We have identified four key areas that are of primary importance to the Newton Public Schools going forward. In naming these, we are not suggesting that they are the only significant topics for us to address, nor that all the earlier goals are completed and no longer part of the school system’s agenda. Rather, we are seeking a strategic focus to help the School Committee and the Superintendent address fundamental issues facing the Newton Public Schools today.

In identifying these challenges, we reiterate our desire to see Newton Public Schools as a leader in the field of education. Leadership requires courage and patience, risk-taking and support. Together with our outstanding faculty and staff, and with the support of the community at large, we seek to preserve the high quality of education Newton has always provided even as we stretch to attain new heights.

1. Secondary School Program

The ultimate goal of a Newton education is to prepare all students for successful lives and constructive citizenship. This requires a secondary school (grades 6-12) program that emphasizes strong academic challenge yet offers students balance in their school and personal lives through co-curricular and other activities. The

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program should be rigorous but not rigid, coherent but not inflexible, continuing the elementary schools' emphasis on standards-based instruction that acknowledges individual differences and student diversity. The curriculum should articulate learning expectations across the seven grade levels, so that previous lessons are reinforced by subsequent instruction. At the same time, schools, especially our high schools, need to be attentive to the social/emotional needs of teenagers and create structures and programs to ensure students are personally connected to the adults who work with them.

2. Workforce/organizational development

The most important interactions that occur in our school system are those that take place every day in classrooms between teachers and students. Nothing is more crucial to the Newton Public Schools going forward than recruiting, retaining and nurturing highly qualified teachers who are prepared to give their best to Newton students. This goal is especially crucial as our school system, like others around the nation, is experiencing a significant turnover in our workforce. With many retirements and new professionals joining the staff, we must find ways to carry on Newton's tradition of excellence, to pass the baton to the next generation of educators. A strong professional development program, along with a constructive system of supervision and evaluation, is key to realizing this goal. Additionally, Newton must anticipate the impending national crisis in educational leadership: with fewer mid-career educators aspiring to administrative and leadership roles in public schools, Newton must groom, recruit and retain exceptional educators to take on the leadership challenges that exist in many areas of the system.

Organizationally, our goal is to create the conditions under which teachers can do their best teaching and students can do their best learning. To that end, the central administration must function increasingly as a service center for the schools rather than their command and control center. In addition, the administration should be structured and staffed in such a way to free the superintendent to attend to the other major priorities outlined in this document.

3. Physical assets

Providing high quality education requires systematic attention to a school system's capital stock, including its buildings and equipment. Our school system's physical plant is aging and has historically been under-maintained. This trend must be reversed by developing a comprehensive plan for the renovation, replacement, and wise use of Newton's school buildings – and for their ongoing maintenance. These efforts need to be appropriately coordinated with City departments and officials. Also vital is the development of a parallel plan for the

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acquisition, maintenance, and periodic upgrading of technology, both for instructional purposes and for the school department's own management. Given past difficulties in acquiring funds for technology, it is important to identify a predictable, steady, renewable revenue stream dedicated to technology.

4. Public engagement

None of the challenges above can be met without strong, informed public support for the Newton Public Schools among parents, elected officials, and citizens at large. People need to know why decisions are being made and to have their voices heard in appropriate ways on key matters. Citizens also have a right to expect from the School Committee and Superintendent a consistent, clear voice articulating the values, priorities, and programs of the Newton Public Schools. The School Committee intends to develop a communications plan that will help it be more visible and accessible to all constituencies and more effective at sharing its own views.

Each of these four challenges is precisely that—a challenge. Each will require careful planning and a willingness to break new ground, as well as skillful implementation. But each offers an opportunity, a chance to further, to renew, and to extend the excellence of the Newton Public Schools. Together with our Superintendent, we are committed to seizing these opportunities and ensuring an outstanding education for all of Newton's children.